DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 415 CS 508 606

AUTHOR Meyer, John
TITLE A Conflict Management Unit.
PUB DATE 8 Apr 94
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Oklahoma City, OK, April 7-10, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Conflict; *Conflict Resolution; Higher Education; Introductory Courses; Problem Solving; *Speech Communication; Undergraduate Students; Units of Study
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Strategies

ABSTRACT

While the basic course in communication cannot eradicate the violence sweeping American society, it can take important steps to reduce violence and conflict by acquainting all college students with alternative means for handling conflicts. First, the instructor should ask the students to try to define "conflict," and then responses to conflict should be discussed. Students can then be exposed to the five conflict styles (competition, compromise, collaboration, avoidance, and accommodation) by having students complete a questionnaire which presents statements about behaviors during conflict, or by having students write down both the dialogue and actions they would enact in one or several conflict situations. Students also need to become aware of what kind of communication can lead to problem solving. Many of these effective communication techniques are already taught in the basic course: awareness of perceptions, active listening, empathy, perspective-taking, nonverbal communication, and organized and clear presentations. Whether discussing conflict management for a day, a week, or two weeks, with at least one exercise and discussion on conflict management, students can be familiarized with a key tool for communicating in today's diverse world. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 372 415

A CONFLICT MANAGEMENT UNIT

John Meyer

University of Southern Mississippi
Box 5131
Speech Communication Department
Hattiesburg, MS 39406--5131
(601) 266-4280
E-MAIL: JOHN_MEYER@BULL.CC.USM.EDU

April 8, 1994

Basic Course Interest Group

Central States Communication Association

Annual Convention, Oklahoma City, OK

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Meyer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS508606

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A CONFLICT MANAGEMENT UNIT

Violence is becoming more and more widespread in the United States and worldwide, and many people are growing more afraid while feeling that there is little that can be done about it. This problem is extensive, of course, but so on a lesser scale is the influence of basic courses in communication across the United States. One version or another of the basic course is usually required of all degree-seeking college students. This provides us with a unique opportunity to combat violence nationwide by targeting all college students in the great variety of locations and schools where the basic course is taught. All of these students can be exposed to a lesson in conflict management.

Often, violence is the result of a flawed reaction to conflict (Campbell, 1984; Filley, 1975; Hocker & Wilmot, 1985; Scherer, 1975). Since communication is central to both the development and resolution of conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985), the basic course can become an important venue for education and discussion of how best to handle conflict and prevent violence. The conflict management unit discussed here is intended as a key step in this process.

First, conflict needs to be defined. Rather than giving students yet another textbook definition, dicussion should be sparked by asking them to try to define conflict. The resulting

definitions will likely be mostly negative. The positive, creative potential of conflict is often overlooked. Hocker and Wilmot (1985, p. 12) supply a more neutral definition: "Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals." Many scholars go on to point out that often the conflict can be managed by changing the perceptions themselves, rather than by competing with others based on those perceptions (Filley, 1975). People generally do not have conflict unless they are interdependent (and hence communicating) in some way. That interdependence can be used to discover commonalities for mutual problem-solving.

Second, responses to conflict should be discussed. When conflicts do occur, different people respond in different ways. Most people develop a typical style for responding to conflict (Blake & Mouton, 1970). Blake and Mouton's (1970) model, the most common model of these styles, presents them as resulting from a combination of an individual's concern for the relationship and concern for the goal which sparked the conflict (Figure 1).

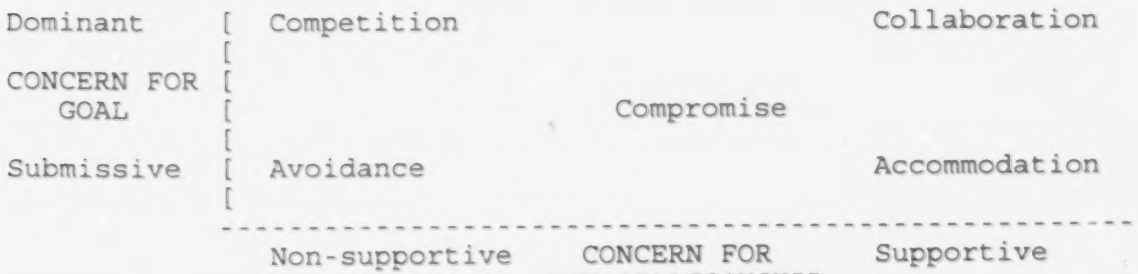

Figure 1: Five Conflict Styles.

COMPETITION involves achieving one's goals at all costs, regardless of the results to others. Competitors are also called "tough battlers," who view the only possible outcome of conflict as a win/lose situation. Competitors, of course, want to be the winner. While this style can be beneficial for quick solutions or defending oneself from abuse or disadvantage, it results in a loser and prevents exploration of mutually beneficial solutions. In the extreme, competition leads to violence.

AVOIDANCE often stems from the perception that all conflict is unpleasant and destructive and must be avoided at all costs. Avoiders remove themselves from conflict whenever possible. While this style may successfully avoid conflict when it would make matters worse, it often results in only a temporary solution, because the issue is not resolved. This often results in a lose/lose situation, as neither party achieves desired goals which engendered the conflict.

ACCOMMODATION generally means giving in. The party feels the relationship is so important that achieving the desired goal is not worth fighting for. It results in a win/lose situation with the accommodator, or "friendly helper," as the loser. While this style preserves harmony and avoids disruption of a situation or relationship, it may sow the seeds for future conflict if the "loser" never gets a chance to "win" the achievement of any desired goals through the relationship. It also prevents a creative

resolution of problems.

COMPROMISE is where both parties settle for half a loaf as better than none. If both parties truly feel that they got the best of the deal, it may work out to be a win/win situation, but more often neither party feels satisfied, and see the conflict as resulting in a lose/lose situation (Filley, 1975). Some effort, at least, has been made through a compromise to meet the desired goals and preserve the relationship of both parties in conflict. A compromise may end in a workable solution, but not in a desired solution for either party.

COLLABORATION is the problem-solving ideal. The relationship is fully preserved while new approaches are suggested which allow both parties to achieve their goals. This can be a time-consuming process, but in the end both parties are more committed to the result. The conflict may even prove beneficial due to the innovative ideas discussed and solutions tried.

Each of these styles can be compared and contrasted to help students determine which style(s) they typically enact, and whether those styles tend to promote problem solving or violence. Some lead to a win/lose outcome, others to a lose/lose outcome, of which violence is clearly the most extreme example, while with other styles it is possible to work for a win/win outcome through communication.

Students can be exposed to these five conflict styles in a

variety of ways. Two enriching methods are described below.

A. Students complete a 26-item questionnaire, which presents statements about behaviors during conflict which are answered "true" or "false." If the statements are responded to honestly, scoring the questionnaire will suggest which of the five styles the respondent typically enacts (Hall, 1969). Discussion can follow about how these conflict styles manifest themselves in students' daily communication interactions.

B. Students are presented with one or several conflict situations, and asked to write down both the dialogue and actions they would enact in such situations. Students can then be presented with the conflict styles, and their individual styles of responding to conflict can be assessed based on their written responses. Below are several situations which could be used for this exercise:

1. You are sitting in the library studying, and feeling cold. It is a freezing day outside and you can't seem to shake the chill. Someone at a table near you, which is next to a window, opens the window a little.

2. You lent a valuable portable radio to someone you thought you knew pretty well, but it has now been more than a week and they still have not returned it, though they said they would need to use it for only a few days.

3. You thought that you and your roommate had agreed on who would do what household cleaning and chores. Yet after a month of living together, it is clear that your roommate is not doing much of the cleaning you thought he/she had agreed to.

4. You have come home hungry from a busy day and want to reward yourself by finishing up the single helping of the leftovers from the delicious meal you and your family ordered in yesterday. As you come in the kitchen, though, another family member is getting out the same leftovers, clearly preparing to eat them.

5. You enjoy your job, and find one particular coworker fun and fascinating to work with. However, this person has a tendency to embarass you in front of other coworkers. This morning this coworker made it look like you had made an error when discussing a project you both have been working on with the supervisor, but you know you had nothing to do with it.

Third and finally, students need to become aware of what kind of comunication can lead to problem solving. Many of these effective communication techniques are already taught in the basic course: awareness of perceptions, active listening, empathy, perspective-taking, nonverbal communication, and organized and clear presentations. However, in the context of conflict, Filley (1975) has presented eight beliefs necessary for communication to lead to successful win/win conflict resolution. These can be discussed to heighten students' awareness of the type of communication necessary during conflicts.

1. Belief in the AVAILABILITY of a mutually acceptable solution. Both parties must be convinced that a solution which could please both parties does, in fact, exist.

2. Belief in the DESIRABILITY of a mutually acceptable solution. Each party must want the other party to be satisfied with the solution. If one party is dead set on "getting," "beating," or defeating the other party, a win/lose situation is actually desired and achieving a win/win resolution will be difficult.

3. Belief in cooperation rather than competition. If conflict is always viewed as a game where one wins and the other loses, achieving problem-solving communication will be difficult. The competitive party will have difficulty believing that the other party to the conflict is not competing, and will think that the other party is simply trying to manipulate the situation to gain whatever advantage possible. The similarities (or interdependence) of the parties must be stressed along with the differences; some "common ground" must be found.

4. Belief that everyone is of equal value. Feelings of

superiority make one party believe that his or her goals or perspectives are the true and right ones. This may be communicated during the conflict and make the other party defensive, making collaboration or problem-solving difficult.

5. Belief in the views of others as legitimate statements of their position. In order for communication in a conflict to be successful, each party must deal with what the other ACTUALLY SAYS, not what they believe the other must really be saying. One party may have changed their mind and tries to show flexibility, only to be accused by the other of "inconsistency." Such statements of position need to be taken at face value.

6. Belief that differences of opinion can be helpful. Conflict should not always be avoided. Getting differences out in the open can lead to their creative resolution, and make both parties happier and more committed to the relationship than before.

7. Belief in the trustworthiness of other members. If one does not trust the other party, it is difficult to achieve collaborative problem-solving. Usually, one must trust--and be willing to demonstrate that trust--until the other party clearly shows he or she cannot be trusted. Often, a demonstration of trust by one party leads to a willingness to trust by the other.

8. Belief that the other party COULD compete but chooses to cooperate. If one party is seen as weak or being forced to cooperate, it may lead to a real or perceived win/lose situation. Both parties may start competing just to prove they cannot be taken advantage of.

In summary, while the basic course in communication cannot eradicate the violence sweeping American society, it can take important steps to reduce it by acquainting all college students with alternative means for handling conflicts. Defining conflict, assessing the five basic conflict styles, and discussing mutual beliefs which affect communication during conflicts will provide students with exposure to basic conflict resolution methods. It is a unit which nicely summarizes many of the more specific communication skills taught in the basic course, suggesting its

placement near the end of the course or at the end of the interpersonal/relationship sections of the course. The amount of time spent in class on the unit is variable, as well, allowing for a fit into courses even where time is at a premium. Whether discussing conflict management for a day, a week, or two weeks, with at least one exercise and discussion on conflict management, students can be familiarized, at least, with a key tool for communicating in today's diverse world.

REFERENCES

Blake, R. R. & Mouton, J. S. (1970). The fifth achievement. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 6, 413-426.

Campbell, S. M. (1984). Beyond the power struggle: Dealing with conflict in love and work. Palo Alto, CA: Impact.

Filley, A. C. (1975). Interpersonal conflict resolution. Madison, WI: Harper Collins.

Hall, J. (1969). Conflict management survey: A survey of one's characteristic reaction to and handling of conflicts between himself and others. Monroe, TX: Telemetrics International.

Hocker, J. L. & Wilmot, W. W. (1985). Interpersonal Conflict, 3rd Ed. Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown.

Scherer, K. R. (1975). Human aggression and conflict. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.